My Stick Collection – A Berkeley Backyard Remembrance

Jeffrey Hunt - August 19, 2026

Over the years, pruning trees and plants in the backyard, I would occasionally cut a branch with an interesting fork or crook or elbow or bend in it. There were sticks of cherry, California buckeye, plum, madrone, even redwood. Most of the trimmings were recycled, but every once in a while there was a piece I'd save.

They started accumulating in the basement. Walking sticks, carved handles, perhaps puppet heads, a little carved detail, stones set into the wood, cracks filled with metal—all sorts of possibilities.

So far, I haven't done a thing.

The impulse to save pieces of wood goes back much further than this backyard. Growing up in Clark County, Washington, and along the Columbia Gorge, I remember the wonderful driftwood that came down the streams, worked smooth by water and time. I used to save pieces for Gramma Dear.

She grew chrysanthemums and used the driftwood in her flower arrangements. She had a drill fitted with flapping strips of sandpaper that wrapped the wood almost as though it had been sculpted by the wind. She would interweave the wood with dried material and live flowers, usually chrysanthemums. I can still see those arrangements in my head.

The pieces I've collected in Berkeley are different. They haven't been shaped by streams. Their character comes mostly from the way the trees themselves grew—the forks, bends, knots and odd changes in direction. I've taken the sander to a few of them.

An enormous old Cécile Brünner rose grows here that may go back nearly as far as the house itself. There was once a driveway running down the west side of the house to a little one-car garage in the back, and the rose had grown completely over it. Some of the longer branches pruned are even used as tall forked supports for that great sprawling rose.

Mostly, though, they wait in the basement.

Then Vivian, Sloan and Audrey came to visit.

I thought it would be funny to take them downstairs and make a serious production out of showing them Papa's stick collection. I expected the joke to be mostly on me.

But they were interested—or at least as interested as any kids would be when something is amusingly shown with fanfare. They looked through the pile, each picked out a stick, and started walking around with them.